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SUBJECT: NORTH KOREA REFUGEES FACE PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA  
(PART I)

11. (SBU) This cable is the first in a two-part series about psychological issues facing North Korean refugees.

12. (SBU) SUMMARY: As the number of North Korean refugees arriving in the South continues to rise, so too do the accounts of harsh living conditions that North Koreans faced on a day to day basis in the DPRK. Even more troubling than the struggle to obtain daily nourishment and shelter are the tales of torture and public execution that most North Korean citizens are likely to witness at some point in their life. For example, 86 percent of defectors in a 2005 Yonsei University survey claimed to have witnessed at least one public execution. Beginning with exposure to these types of tragic experiences in North Korea, the vast majority of defectors continue to experience various forms of psychological trauma in China and other countries, continuing even after they make it to South Korea. END SUMMARY.

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STUDY: DEFECTORS AND PTSD  
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13. (SBU) In April 2005, Yonsei University Professor Dr. Jeon Woo-taek conducted the first large-scale study on the relationship between traumatic events and the prevalence of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) among North Korean defectors residing in the Republic of Korea (ROK). According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-IV (DSM-IV), PTSD arises in a person who experienced, witnessed, or was confronted with an event(s) that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of one's self or others. Jeon's study showed that in addition to physical trauma that individuals experienced themselves (e.g., rape and unexpected sickness), PTSD could also develop because of stress related to human relationships, such as concerns about missing family members who had gone in search of food. Even short of PTSD, it is generally accepted that defectors also suffer from depression, anxiety disorder, and other mental disorders.

14. (SBU) Dr. Jeon told us that North Korea has a strong tradition of emphasizing family relationships and solidarity.

Therefore, if someone commits a political crime, the North Korean government punishes not only this person but also his/her family members as well. Since this method is used as a powerful and effective means of controlling people, family bonds and solidarity among North Koreans have strengthened, and consequently, worry and concern about their family members have become more intense.

15. (SBU) Jeon and his team of 19 psychiatry graduate students conducted face-to-face interviews with 200 North Korean defectors living in Seoul. Respondents completed a survey where they were asked to document both the frequency and nature of trauma that they experienced while living in North Korea and in China, following their departure from the DPRK. Of the 200 defectors surveyed, 59 were diagnosed with PTSD, accounting for a 29.5 percent prevalence. Jeon noted that a previous study of defectors living in China found a 56 percent prevalence rate for PTSD, suggesting that defectors are able to reduce some aspects of anxiety and stress upon being resettled in the ROK.

16. (SBU) Jeon's study also showed that a slightly higher rate of PTSD diagnosis among women compared to men (31 percent and 28 percent, respectively). Jeon was surprised to find that women showed a higher frequency of PTSD given that men recorded a higher frequency of exposure to traumatic events both in North Korea and China.

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TRAUMA IN NORTH KOREA  
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17. (SBU) The Associated Press published an article on November 27 that asserted public executions in the North were

on the rise, citing a recent execution where 150,000 spectators allegedly looked on as a firing squad executed a factory chief accused of making international phone calls. The article is based on a report from Good Friends, a South Korean human rights NGO that provides assistance to refugees in the PRC. The article went on to note that four other public executions had occurred in recent months. The representative of Good Friends, Venerable Pomnyun, explained in the article that, "These executions are aimed at educating (North Koreans) to control society and prevent crimes."

18. (SBU) Dr. Jeon's survey also found that the most common forms of trauma (and the corresponding frequency of the trauma among survey respondents) that North Koreans experience are: witnessing public executions (86 percent), witnessing the death of a family member or relative (81 percent), witnessing a severe beating (71 percent), witnessing a punishment for political misconduct (65 percent) and the death of a family member or relative due to illness (61 percent).

19. (SBU) In addition to witnessing public executions, many North Koreans have also personally experienced periods of famine that were coupled with severe hunger or death due to starvation. Professor Chung Byung-ho, a cultural anthropologist at Hanyang University, told poloff that 70 percent of North Korean defectors came from the Hamgyeong provinces in North Korea which were the hardest hit by famine in the mid 1990s. According to Chung, this traumatic period marked a turning point in the minds of many North Koreans where they shifted from trusting the regime and its central distribution system to living a life of "every man for himself."

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...IN CHINA  
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10. (SBU) Professor Chung also asserted that many North Korean defectors spend a significant period of time in China because they are able to justify in their minds that they have not completely abandoned their family back in North Korea as long as they remain in China. In fact, many of them

leave the North intending to work in China and send money and supplies back across the border to their family in the DPRK. According to Chung, once these refugees depart China or enter the official pipeline to come to South Korea, it becomes clear in their mind that they are never going back to North Korea and that they may never see their family again - thus, marking another significant turning point in the psychological health of defectors.

¶11. (SBU) In addition, North Koreans living in China have not been officially recognized as political refugees by the Chinese government. As a result, they experience considerable difficulty in finding food, water, and shelter and live in constant fear of being tracked down by Chinese authorities or by the North Korean secret police operating in China. Experts and activists agree that DPRK refugees take an enormous risk by entering and seeking shelter in foreign embassies in China in an attempt to enter South Korea.

¶12. (SBU) In 2007, 77 percent of North Korean defectors arriving in the South were female and sixty percent of them are between the ages of 20 and 40. These demographics show the high proportion of female refugees that are making their way through China, often with the aid of unscrupulous brokers. According to Professor Chung, even some of the religious organizations that claim to be helping North Korean refugees in China resort to various forms of abuse given the uneven power structure that exists between the provider and recipient of aid, while physical abuse is sometimes used by these groups as a method to keep order among an unruly group of defectors.

¶13. (SBU) In addition to the other forms of trauma, an increasing number of North Korean female defectors are

reportedly being forced into marriages with Chinese men with the intermediaries collecting a fee. Kim Choon-ae, a North Korean defector now living in the South, told Voice of America (VOA) that she was kidnapped in China by human traffickers - something she says happens to many North Korean women. When she and other women fought back, Kim said they were turned over to police and eventually repatriated to the North.

¶14. (SBU) In April 2007, the Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs studied the health of 6,500 North Korean defectors who had arrived in South Korea between 2000 and ¶2005. It found a high infection rate for syphilis, at 1.8 percent in 2004 and 2.1 percent in 2005. Of 700 women aged 20-49 hosted at the ROKG's Hanawon resettlement facility south of Seoul, one out of five suffered from some type of gynecological disorder.

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COMMENT  
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¶15. (SBU) North Korean refugees are one of the most vulnerable populations in Asia. While the harsh conditions within the DPRK drive many North Koreans outside of the country's borders, there remains a long and treacherous road ahead as they make their way to their final destination in South Korea, the U.S., or elsewhere. To further complicate the plight of these refugees, there are reports of ethnic Korean Chinese who attempt to pose as North Koreans and seek resettlement in another country, in addition to other refugee benefits. Close cooperation and coordination between the U.S. and ROK will continue to ensure that the U.S. is both doing all that it can to assist North Korean refugees while maintaining the integrity of our resettlement efforts.  
VERSHBOW